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ABSTRACT

In order to determine whether organizational communication (OC) had matured as an academic field, a study examined the course structure, course content, and teaching practices of a variety of OC courses. A 19-item questionnaire was sent to 762 OC professionals, 73 of whom indicated that they actually taught OC courses. Results showed that the course is almost always called organizational communication, most schools offer it every term or every year, the average enrollment is about 30 students, and the course is usually an elective. Although no topic was covered in every OC course, communication theory, communication networks, organizational theory, communication climate, and informal communication were covered in at least 70 to 80% of the courses surveyed. Every course also included material on the improvement of communication in some form. Most teachers used a lecture/discussion method, and almost all used a textbook. The consistency of these results indicates that the field is moving out of its infancy and into a more mature stage. (JL)

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THE CONTENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: MOVEMENT TOWARDS AGREEMENT

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In the early 1970s courses in Organizational Communication (O.C.) began proliferating in American colleges and universities. Several authors including Wright and Sherman (1970)[1], Hatch, et. al. (1973)[2], Downs and Larimer (1974)[3], and Lewis (1975)[4], surveyed teachers to determine what is being taught as O.C. The common result of these studies was the conclusion that a great many things are taught as O.C. Rogers(1978)[5], supported this in a study of O.C. texts which found that no single topic is found in every text and most topics appear in fewer than half the texts.

Recently Pace and Ross (1981)[6] again surveyed teachers of O.C. They found much greater consistency in the topics covered. Since consistency in coverage is an important indication of the maturation of an academic field this finding is significant. But a single study is not enough to document a trend and so the present study was conceived as a compliment to the Pace and Ross study to find out whether the subject matter of O.C. is in fact crystalizing.

SAMPLE

One problem of the Pace and Ross study is the narrowness of its sample frame. In order to reach as many potential teachers of O.C. as possible a 19 item questionnaire with return postage guaranteed was mailed to all members of the Academy of Management O.C. Division, the International Communication Division IV, and the American Business Communication Association with academic affiliations. A total of 796 questionnaires were mailed, only 73 responses (9.2%) were received from people actually teaching O.C. courses. Many people indicated that they were interested in O.C. but did not teach the course.

Most of our respondents were in Communication or Speech Departments (54.8%) with a sizeable group in Business Schools (30.1%). They had been teaching O.C. for an average of about 8 years and their schools had been offering the course an average of about 9 years. This is consistent with the observation that most O.C. courses developed in the early 1970s.

RESULTS

The results of this survey will be presented in three sections: Course Structure, Course Content, and Teaching Practices.

Course Structure. One indication of agreement among O.C. teachers is that the course is almost always called Organizational Communication (67.1%) or some close variation (Communication and Organization, Communication in Organizations, etc.) (20%). Most schools offer the course every term (45.5%) or every year (39.4%). On the average 3.3 sections of O.C. are offered per year, but 43.4% of the schools offer only one section per year. The average enrollment per section is 29.1 students (the mode is 30 students). If we assume that this survey reflects about half of the O.C. instructors in the U.S. then about 12,500 students are enrolled in O.C. per year. This assumption is consistent with the estimates of Downs and Larimer (1974) and Pace and Ross (1981), and with the actual size of the O.C. textbook market.

In most schools (65.8%) the O.C. course is an elective open to all students in the program. The O.C. course is required of all Business School students in 13.7% of the schools and it is required of all Speech/Communication students in 13.7% of the departments. In most schools (53.4%) there are no prerequisites for the O.C. course. Where there is a prerequisite (24.7% of schools), it is usually a basic communication course. In addition to the O.C. course most schools also offer Advertising (71.2%), Business Writing (64.4%), and Public Relations (60.3%). Many schools also offer Business Speaking (47.9%), Communication and Decision Making (30.1%), or Communication and Conflict (23.3%). These findings about the elective nature of the course, the prerequisites, and other offerings are consistent with the Pace and Ross (1981) findings.

Course Content. The most important question in assessing agreement about the content of O.C. concerns the topics actually covered in the course. Table 1 lists the topics which the present study found were most frequently covered in the O.C. course.

Table 1 about here

Table 1 also compares the frequency ranks of these topics with the ranks in the Pace and Ross study. The pattern of ranks is very similar. The Pace and Ross top 10 ranked topics included Examinations (rank 3) which we did not include because it is not really an O.C. topic and Theory of Organizational Communication (rank 9) which ranked 17 in our study.

Neither this study nor the Pace and Ross study found any topic which is covered in every O.C. course. However, the top five topics (Communication Theory, Communication Networks, Organizational Theory, Communication Climate, and Informal Communication) are covered in at least 70-80% of the courses surveyed. This suggests that there is a great deal of agreement at least about the theoretical core of O.C. Differences in course content seem to be in the applications of O.C. Theory to problems. The idea that a lack of consensus exists on the application of O.C. Theory and Concepts to specific organizational problems or forms of communication was reinforced by responses to an open ended question about other topics. Of 36 responses only 7 referred to communication theories or concepts. The other 29 responses all suggested specific applications or forms of O.C. which should be included in the course.

This finding suggests that we are beginning to see the emergence of a general agreement on the theoretical and conceptual base of O.C., but there is no such agreement on where or how to apply the theory and concepts. The theoretical core includes

material from Communication Theory, Organizational Theory, and Organizational Behavior along with material on the operation of communication in the organization (channels, networks, climates). The emergence of some agreement on a somewhat coherent set of concepts represents a significant improvement over the state of the art in the early 1970s. Having developed a set of concepts the field seems to be looking for problems to which the concepts can be applied. Every course studied in the present survey includes material on the improvement of communication in some form. Sometimes this means improving communication through interviewing, group discussion, listening, public speaking, writing, symbolizing, counselling, public relations, advertising, graphics or Transactional Analysis. Sometimes this means applying communication concepts to organizational problems of conflict, innovation, productivity, decision making, training, evaluation, interpersonal relations, or change. At this time there seem to be a great many potential applications for O.C. concepts. We can only hope that in time we will discover which applications of O.C. concepts are most fruitful.

Teaching Practices. Since the apparent consistency in course structure and content could be explained away if significantly different teaching methods were used, we asked about methods. Again we found a great deal of similarity. Most teachers use a lecture/discussion format (79.5%). Most use the black board (72.6%) or transparencies (50.7%). Most instructors have students analyze short cases (63.0%), participate in experiential exercises (54.8%), or present reports (50.7%). Many use guest speakers from industry (42.5%).

In terms of materials, almost all instructors use a textbook (85.0%) and more than half suppliment the text with a reader or handouts (52.1%). Table 2 lists the 10 most frequently mentioned texts.

Table 2 about here

Table 2 also compares the frequency ranks of these texts with their ranks in the Pace and Ross study. The pattern of ranks is again very similar. In both studies the Goldnaber book was mentioned by about 30% of respondents, the Farace, Monge, and Russel book by about 15%, the Koehler, Anatol, and Applbaum book by about 12%. No other books had as much as a 10% share of the mentions. In terms of readers, far and away the most frequently mentioned was Huseman, Logue and Freshley's Readings in Interpersonal and Organizational Communication (Allyn & Bacon). The similarity of findings in the two studies adds credibility to the perception of growing agreement among teachers of O.C.

CONCLUSIONS

The consistency in course structure, course content, and teaching methods among teachers of O.C. suggests that the field is moving out of its infancy and into a more mature stage. We have begun developing agreement on the theoretical foundations of O.C. Specifically the field is grounded in Communication Theory, Organizational Theory, and Organizational Behavior. We have begun developing agreement on the targets of O.C. analysis. Specifically our analysis should start with consideration of Communication Networks, Communication Channels, and Communication Climates in Organizations. We have developed agreement with the notion that organizational communication has organizational consequences. However, we have not agreed on which aspects of organizational communication are most important, which aspects have which consequences, or which organizational consequences are most significant. This will be our challenge in the next decade as the field continues to mature.

NOTES

1. David Wright and Susanne Sherman, "A Survey of Organizational Communication at the Graduate Level in Speech Communication Programs: Initial Report," unpublished monograph, 1970.

2. Richard A. Hatch, Delbert Bulick, Norman B. Sigband, and James C. Steele, "Business Communication at the Graduate Level in American Colleges of Business." The Journal of Business Communication, 10, 1973, pp. 29-37.

3. Cal W. Downs and Michael W. Larimer, "The Status of Organizational Communication in Speech Departments," Speech Teacher, 23, 1974, pp. 325-329.

4. Phillip V. Lewis, "The Status of 'Organizational Communication' in Colleges of Business," The Journal of Business Communication, 12, 1975, pp. 25-28.

5. Donald P. Rogers, "The Content of Organizational Communication Texts," The Journal of Business Communication, 16, 1978, pp. 57-64.

6. R. Wayne Pace and Robert F. Ross, "The Basic Course in Organizational Communication," unpublished monograph, Brigham Young University, 1981.

Table 1

TOPICS MOST FREQUENTLY COVERED IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION COURSES BY RANK

TOPIC	RANK	
	Present Study	Pace & Ross
Communication Theory/Models	1	5
Communication Networks	2	1
Organizational Theory	3	6
Communication Climate	4	4
Informal Communication	5	2
Leadership	6	7
Management	7	8
Motivation	8	10
Listening	9	19
Organizational Change	10	16

Table 2

BOOKS MOST FREQUENTLY USED IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION COURSES BY RANK

Author, Title, Publisher	RANK: Present Study	RANK: Pace & Ross
1. Goldnaber. Organizational Communication (Wm. C. Brown)	1	1
2. Farace, Monge, & Russell. Communicating and Organizing (Addison-Wesley)	2	2
3. Koehler, Anatol, and Applbaum. Organizational Communication (Holt, Rinehart, & Winston)	3 (tie)	3
4. Lewis. Organizational Communication (Grid)	3 (tie)	-
5. Tortoriello, Blatt, and Dewine. Communication in the Organization (McGraw-Hill)	3 (tie)	10
6. Rogers and Rogers. Communication in Organizations (Free Press)	6	5 (tie)
7. Baird. Dynamics of Organizational Communication (Harper & Row)	7 (tie)	5 (tie)
8. Allen. Organizational Management through Communication (Harper & Row)	7 (tie)	4
9. Johnson. Communication: The Process of Organizing (Allyn & Bacon)	7 (tie)	7 (tie)
10. Huseman, Lahiff, and Hatfield. Interpersonal Communication in Organizations (Holbrook)	7 (tie)	-